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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN (JMUDGE), DHL/PHD (CKUCHTA-HELBLING)

E.O. 190356: N/A

TAGS: [POLITICAL](#)

SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: UPDATE ON MURDER OF OPPOSITION FIGURE

REF: ALMATY 576

1. (SBU) Summary: An estimated three to five thousand people, including the Ambassador, DCM and representatives from other missions and international organizations, attended the February 15 memorial services in Almaty for slain opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbailuly. No prominent GOK officials represented the government at the memorial. After the service, opposition leaders delivered emotional speeches, many labeling the crime a "political assassination," and placing blame on the government. While the services and a subsequent cemetery procession took place without incident in Almaty, a For Just Kazakhstan (FJK) activist reported to Emboff that several opposition sympathizers had been detained during February 15 gatherings in other cities.

2. (SBU) Summary (continued): At a February 14 press conference, FJK leaders denounced the crime as politically motivated, and announced the formation of a public commission to investigate the murder. Several GOK officials, including a Deputy Minister of Interior, have down-played the possibility of a political motive for the murder. Meanwhile, the GOK has accepted an Embassy offer of FBI assistance in investigating the crime, a development which the GOK may make public as early as February 16.

3. (U) Summary (continued): As of February 15, the local wire service Interfax-Kazakhstan had provided the most extensive coverage, television news focused on facts with no commentary by public officials, and official and pro-government daily newspapers had not published any information about the murder. End Summary.

Thousands Attend Sarsenbailuly's Memorial

4. (U) The February 15 memorial services in Almaty for slain opposition leader Altynbek Sarsenbailuly were well-organized and attended by some three to five thousand people, including the Ambassador, DCM and representatives from other diplomatic and international organizations, including the OSCE. No prominent GOK officials represented the government at the memorial. Following the viewing of the body, Sarsenbailuly's followers gathered in the street near Almaty's Academy of Science, where the services took place, to hear fiery speeches from a "who's who" list of opposition leaders. The speakers almost uniformly denounced Sarsenbailuly's murder as a political assassination perpetrated by the government. The emotional attendees, many of whom carried signs with slogans such as "The hands of the regime are bloody," and "It is impossible to intimidate us," then set off on foot to accompany the coffin to the distant cemetery.

5. (U) Among the notable remarks delivered to the memorial crowd, opposition journalist Sergei Duvanov said that "everyone knows who is behind this political assassination. You are scared to name his name. I am not. It is Mr. Ninety-one percent" (Note: an allusion to President Nazarbayev whose official tally in the December 2005 election 91 percent.) FJK activist Amirzhan Kosanov declared that "it is time to stop keeping silent. People should start reacting to this political terror." Duvanov called on the President to come back urgently from an overseas vacation and "explain what he is going to do. Just expressing his condolences is not enough."

Opposition Supporters Detained?

6. (SBU) Kosanov called POL FSN at mid-day on February 15 to confirm that the memorial service and funeral procession in Almaty had occurred without incident. However, he reported, Sarsenbailuly sympathizers in other cities, including Astana, Kokshetau and Taldykorgan, had been detained in the course of February 15 memorial gatherings and marches in those places. Post has not been able to confirm Kosanov's allegations.

"For a Just Kazakhstan" Press Conference

17. (U) In a February 14 press conference, FJK leaders denounced Sarsenbaiuly's death as a "political assassination." Former FJK presidential candidate Zharmakhan Tuyakbay demanded swift action by the authorities, and called for Parliament to discuss the case. Several of Tuyakbay's associates made a connection between Sarsenbaiuly's death and those of Zamanbek Nurkadilov and political activist Yelena Nikitina's daughter claiming that all three were politically motivated, and aimed at intimidating the opposition. (Note: Nikitina's 16 year old daughter had worked on Tuyekbay's campaign. She disappeared before the Dec. 5 election, and her body was found several weeks later. A family member was arrested and charged with her murder. End Note.)

18. (SBU) Asked by the press why Sarsenbaiuly had been targeted, FJK's Tolegen Zhukeyev responded that it was because Sarsenbaiuly had been a popular politician. After the press conference, another FJK leader, Bulat Abilov, gave a different answer, explaining that both Nurkadilov and Sarsenbaiuly had been "very close" to Nazarbayev, and thus may have possessed compromising materials about the President. Asked "why now?" Abilov suggested that "somebody in high office decided it was the right time because the president was on leave abroad." Speculating further, he added that "Nazarbayev was ready for dialogue with us. And somebody decided to prevent the dialogue this way." FJK officials announced that the opposition had formed a public commission to investigate the murder.

#### Deputy Interior Minister Offers Other Motives

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19. (U) A handful of GOK officials have spoken to the press about the case, in most cases to minimize the political angle of the murder. According to press reports, Deputy Interior Minister Kasymov termed "premature" attempts to label the murder "political." Among other possible motives for the crime, Kasymov cited business and family affairs, as well as "murder in order to destabilize the situation in our country." Kasymov suggested that, in all likelihood, Sarsenbaiuly was killed by "someone close to him." If it was "someone from the outside," he said, "there would be bruises at least."

#### Media Reaction: Muted So Far

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110. (U) As of February 15, the local wire service Interfax-Kazakhstan had provided the most extensive coverage to the crime. Television news focused on facts with no commentary by public officials, and official and pro-government daily newspapers had not published any information about the murder. (Note: Many Kazakhstani newspapers are centrist or progressive weeklies that are issued on Thursdays and Fridays, so print coverage may appear later). Only Interfax published commentary made during the February 14 press conference.

111. (U) The February 13 primetime evening news on the three official and independent national broadcast networks relayed the facts as then known. The next evening, only Channel 31, an independent national broadcaster, covered the case. Three separate reports provided updates on the case plus reactions from prominent community leaders to the murder, and commentary from members of the opposition.

#### GOK Accepts U.S. Offer of Assistance

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112. (SBU) In a February 14 conversation with Adilbek Dzhakysbekov, Head of the Presidential Administration, the Ambassador offered the government forensic and other U.S. assistance in investigating the crime. On February 15, Foreign Minister Tokayev relayed the GOK's acceptance of the offer. LEGATT, in consultation with FBI headquarters, will pursue this request. He will speak with Ministry of Interior officials on February 16 to determine the scope of the GOK's needs, as well as USG resources to available to assist.

113. (SBU) Comment. Sarsenbaiuly's memorial service and funeral procession were solemn events and extremely well-attended. The latter likely speaks both to Sarsenbaiuly's personal and political popularity and to a level of popularity among the politically active elements of Almaty. Despite the opposition's fiery rhetoric following the discovery of the crime, there is no evidence whatsoever that the authorities, let alone Nazarbayev, had anything to do with the murder. Indeed, from our perspective, he would seem to have much to lose, and nothing to gain, from such a drastic move, which is very uncharacteristic of Kazakhstan's national and political culture.

114. (SBU) Comment Cot'd: Nonetheless, while other motives

cannot be ruled out, at this point a political motivation seems to be the most plausible explanation. The only problem is identifying a political force that would actually gain from the assassination. From the Embassy's perspective, the GOK's acceptance of U.S. forensic assistance suggests that the government is determined to establish the credibility and seriousness of its murder investigation. This will help counteract the initial impression in the international press, stimulated by understandably emotional (if not particularly logical) accusations by the opposition, that Nazarbayev and the government have something to do with this murder. End Comment.

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